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ABSTRACT

One of a series of practitioner-oriented newsletters, the document provides elementary school principals with strategies for stimulating greater community involvement in the schools. In light of the increasing numbers of community members without children in school (now about two-thirds of the population), the article describes an Ohio campaign using a 15-minute slide show presentation to build greater support for the city's schools among the nonparent community. Suggestions for bringing senior citizens back to school include "Grandparents Day," taping old-timer stories, and setting up a Golden Age Club. In addition, the article lists a number of ways to involve local business people in the schools. Other ideas for enhancing school-community relations include school newsletters, student displays during elections, inviting health agencies to provide free services (such as blood pressure tests), student-produced radio and TV spots, and student artwork displays throughout the city. (LH)

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# WINNING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

April 1983

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National Association of Elementary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

Here's How...
vol. 1, no. 5, April 1983

# Winning Public Support for Education

Volume 1, Number 5 April 1983

A few years ago, a major news magazine kicked off a series of articles on the public schools with a striking cover illustration: a pencil tortured into a knot. A powerful image of things gone wrong, the picture lodged firmly in the minds of many readers—especially those who had no other source of reliable information about public education with which to temper it.

With declining birthrates and increased longevity, a growing percentage of the general population falls into that category. Ten years ago, according to U.S. census data, 44 percent of adults in this country had children in the public schools. By 1980, however, that figure had shrunk to 38 percent—or less than one-third of the total population. By 1990, the Census Bureau predicts, there will actually be more people in this country aged 55 and over than there will be students in our public schools, grades K-12.

Today's two-thirds majority who have no children currently enrolled in public schools can be called, for the sake of simplicity, nonparents, though many have grown children and others have children in private schools. Whatever their age or circumstances, these nonparents, by virtue of numbers alone, have the power to support education initiatives or to block them. They can provide valuable resources to supplement pared-down school budgets, or they can opt not to, on the theory that the public schools do not benefit them directly. On what information do nonparents base these decisions?

In many cases their own school years, or even the school years of their sons and daughters, are long past. The local school, to them, may be no more than a building to drive past on the way to someplace else—a building where, the talk is, "Things aren't what they used to be."

Lacking a more direct link to the life of the school, nonparents must depend primarily on the media for news and views of today's public education. And as the knotted pencil suggests, media coverage of education too often focuses more on newsy trends or crises than on ongoing issues.

Interested nonparents can, of course, turn to school district publications or to word-of-mouth communication with public school parents, students, and employees—neighbors and friends who have a closer knowledge of what is happening in the classroom. But not all single, childless, or older people are moved to explore these sources—much less to see for themselves as school visitors or volunteers.

But support from the community is crucial if public schools are to prosper—or merely survive. Principals and other educators who recognize that they need the endorsement of the total community—not just parents—see why it is important to apply basic elements of school public relations to this new and growing audience. However, reaching these people takes extra effort.

If parents are generally well informed about their local schools, it is because they are interested in their children's progress. In addition, their children keep them up to date on school programs and events. But without these natural ambassadors to spread the word, the school must try harder to inform nonparents and involve them in school activities.

### *"See For Yourself"*

In 1980 schools in Columbus, Ohio, began a districtwide "See For Yourself" campaign to build greater support for the city's schools among the nonparent community. The brainchild of then-superintendent Joseph Davis, "See For Yourself" brought some 30,000 nonparents into the Columbus schools during the first year alone. The project has since been replicated in other districts.

"People get so much of their information about education from the public media," said Davis. "They often have the impression that the public schools are blackboard jungles. We were convinced that our schools had orderly atmospheres and solid educational programs, and we wanted people to see for themselves."

To inaugurate the program, the district communications staff produced a 15-minute slide presentation on the Columbus schools to show to school visitors and other groups. Suggestions for promoting the program and involving nonparents in school activities were sent to each of the district's 149 schools. Among the ideas:

- Send "picketers" out to shopping centers with signs urging people to "See For Yourself."
- Get area merchants to provide "See For Yourself" coupons that can be exchanged for free or discounted goods and services.
- Start a challenge chain: challenge a well-known local resident to come to school, then ask that person to challenge another to "See For Yourself."
- Contact business and civic organizations and suggest that they tour your school in lieu of one of their monthly meetings.
- Plan an evening meeting around some "how to" topic—preparing tax returns, estate planning, family budgeting, and so forth—and invite nonparents to attend.
- Invite local craftsmen to school to demonstrate and display their crafts throughout the year.

As Davis had hoped, these starter ideas inspired principals and teachers to develop their own "See For Yourself" programs. At Hamilton Avenue Elementary School, for example, principal Benny Banks realized that careful planning and publicizing weren't always enough to ensure a good turnout for a special event. People need an incentive to come to school, and Banks believed the best incentive system is one that works through the children.

"We printed up 'funny money' on the school duplicating machine," said Banks, "and gave students $1,000 for each nonparent and $500 for each parent they brought to a school event." Teachers kept track of how much each student earned, and at the end of the year the money was traded in for such treats as a full-length feature movie.

Aware that some community members couldn't be "dragged to school with a team of mules," Banks arranged an alternative: students could write letters describing the school and deliver them in person. Residents at a nearby nursing home received those letters, as did other hard-to-reach locals. One way or another, each child in school earned money during the program, and in the process attendance at school functions increased dramatically among parents and nonparents alike.

Another Columbus principal, Meredith Johnson, concentrated on local realtors. Johnson invited the area real estate association to Alpine Elementary School for a get-acquainted breakfast meeting. After coffee and doughnuts, she gave a slide show, made brief remarks about the school, then opened the meeting to questions.

"Columbus had just implemented a comprehensive desegregation program," Johnson said, "and many of the realtors were concerned that busing would have a negative effect on housing sales in the neighborhood." Once these concerns were out in the open, Johnson was able to clear up misconceptions and point out positive aspects of the plan—and of the educational program at Alpine.

### *Bringing Senior Citizens Back to School*

A perennial favorite in school PR notebooks is Grandparents' Day—a tried-and-true way to expand involvement beyond the nuclear family. But with the mobility of today's families and increases in age-segregated retirement villages, a community's youngsters and its senior citizens may be virtual strangers to one another.

One principal who has brought these two groups closer together and still maintained the family feeling of Grandparents' Day is George Pawlas, now principal of Mill Creek Elementary School in Columbia, South Carolina. At his previous school in Ohio, Pawlas built Grandparents' Day up from a meager 30 visitors the first year to 250 a few years later.

Pawlas planned the program for the week before or after Mother's Day—a time when out-of-town relatives might visit and the weather would probably be pleasant. Parents supplied grandparents' names and addresses, and the school sent formal invitations. A brief presentation featuring student performers highlighted the day's events.

For the many students whose grandparents could not attend, Pawlas worked with local social service organizations to round up "adopted grandparents"—senior citizens who lived nearby and welcomed a chance to visit the school. He also found "alumni" who still lived in the community and invited them to share their memories of the school. One 80-year-old former student was asked by third-graders to come back and tape his reminiscences. The tapes were added to the school's archives and have been used in subsequent years to spark interest in local history.

Grandparents' Day may not always produce rich contributions to oral history, but once the ice has been broken some of the senior citizens who attend may be interested enough to come back as volunteers. Getting them into the schools is the first step. Some principals have done so by turning an empty classroom into a senior citizen's center, or by setting up a Golden Age Club with free admission to school events, free registration in adult classes, and other benefits for older citizens.

### *Working with Business and Industry*

Another valuable but still largely untapped source of support for public schools is local business and industry. Not only are many business leaders parents or grandparents themselves, they are community leaders who have professional as well as personal interest in the work of the schools.

Business people can involve themselves in the schools in a number of ways:

- Speaking to student groups about careers and job training.
- Freeing up employees to serve as tutors, guest lecturers, or judges for science fairs and other contests.
- Inviting students to company tours or "day on the job" field trips.
- Providing leadership and management training for school personnel.
- Sponsoring student clubs and special projects, such as plays.
- Providing technical assistance with school publications.
- Providing resource materials, such as publications or audiovisuals.

In many areas, one-to-one pairings of schools and businesses are being set up to enrich the educational experiences offered to students. Under such names as "Adopt-a-School" or "Partnerships in Education," these programs recognize the school's importance in the larger life of the community. Among the common activities of such programs are loans or donations of equipment, career counseling, financial support, classroom speakers, and assistance with curriculum planning.

According to George Pawlas, business and industry help and support should be a two-way proposition. Located in a rapidly industrializing Sun Belt state, Pawlas' current school hopes to be the beneficiary of corporate involvement in education. To make the initial contact, Pawlas plans to visit the personnel officers of a large company now relocating in his area. He will provide information about local schools that can be passed on to employees new to the region and offer to help families get acquainted with the school system.

### *More Ideas That Work*

Some communications activities that schools already engage in can, with a little rethinking, be targeted to nonparents as well as parents. The school newsletter is a prime example. Copies can be sent to local civic groups, religious organizations, and businesses, to reporters, members of the board of education, organizations that supply school volunteers, and, if budget permits, to every household in the attendance area. (To keep press runs and mailing costs down, ask parents to pass the newsletter along to nonparent neighbors when they have finished with it. The exchange can spark comments and questions and give parents a chance to champion their schools.)

If nonparents read your newsletter, be sure to include information that will interest them as well, such as community announcements or calls to participate in paper drives or other school benefits.

Another ready-made opportunity for school-community partnerships is voting day. If your school is used as a polling place, take advantage of this once-a-year chance to reach nonparents with displays highlighting student work and school programs. Some Columbus, Ohio, principals made election day part of the "See For Yourself" program by running guided tours of the building and inviting local health agencies to provide free services, such as blood pressure and glaucoma tests.

If it is difficult to get the public to come to you, take your school program to the public through student-produced radio and TV spots or through displays, demonstrations, and performances at the local shopping mall. A memorable example of this approach was the "Art in the Open" program of the Richmond, Virginia, public schools during National Youth Art Month in March 1982.

The inspiration of an elementary art teacher, "Art in the Open" linked student artists and corporate sponsors and featured student-designed billboards throughout the city. Each billboard delivered a visual and verbal message about a particular program or school, from "Knowledge is mushrooming at Carver Elementary," to "We're making magic at Maymont School." A related project, "Art Buses," involved mounting student artwork in the advertising panels of 25 Richmond buses.

Art education was the primary focus of both projects, but the eye-catching displays, and the media coverage they attracted, resulted in public interest and pride in the entire educational program. And that, of course, is the primary goal of taking the school's message to the public at large. A community that feels good about its schools is a community that will support them.

*Here's How* is issued as a service to members. Copies may be purchased from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. One copy $.50; 2-9 copies $.45; each; 10 or more copies $.40 each. PAYMENT MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER.